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Non-Fiction (2,126 Words)

The US Army Gas Chamber

Autumn 1983, and the US Army gas chamber only made sense as a sort of fatal switch, sitting on a hillside. It was the last of basic training ventures in the Army woods, off two days of bivouac and a suite of various chemical warfare attacks, some planned some not. Add chunks of reading old manuals and newer cartography grids, each explaining how to survive a nuclear blast dropped mere miles away...from the Soviet Union's 50-megaton *Tsar Bomba*, aka RDS-220, no less. And a USSR weapon that ultra-large was old, supposedly alive only in 1961.

Beyond study and movement, 80s US nuclear and chemical warfare basic training protocol pages were often surreal, certainly not by intent or design. 60s and mid-70s illustrations of soldiers navigating post-nuke fallout and other oddities was often more akin to über-evangelical Chick tracts, or maybe Saturday morning LA hippie cartoon animation where the staff on certain network shows were clearly testing lysergic acid diethylamide, with cornflakes.

Anyway, it was September 1983 and outta nowhere we were all forced from 2AM basic training beds into full downstairs formation...where we thought surprise CS would be sprayed, for sure. In the nighttime gathering company commanders instead revealed the US was hours from military engagement with USSR; Russians threw a couple air-to-air missiles at Korean 747 airliner KAL-007 near Sakhalin Island and obliterated the full-civilian jet. 269 souls, baby.

Colonel's final words around at 2:13 AM: "Welcome to war."

Damn.

But, didn't happen of course. KAL-007 led to endless rattling of diplomatic sabres, like Granada. Worlds simply went on...to things far worse, but that's a another story.

Back to the nuke/chemical training gas chamber CS thing, our platoon went on to test various gear from dawn to dusk, pouring gallons of salty personal sweat in every imaginable direction from material worn and used.

Simulated attacks on our platoon were chem grenades mostly; one poor chap somehow managed to *not* get his mask on so he bawled like a baby and rolled on the ground. Wowzer.

It later occurred to everyone as hours passed that the gas chamber itself was the ultimate purpose here, and remained upcoming. Always discussed like a slaughterhouse.

Who survives?

Some in the whole platoon were talking suspected nonsense about people who'd died in CS. Guy from a previous op told us the chamber was way like falling in a fry basket at a burger shack. Really? I'd seen a foole stick his forearm in a Vegas corndog fryer off Lake Mead & Civic Center. Ever seen INCREDIBLE MELTING MAN...? Ludicrous movie, but that's what the guy's arm looked like, Melting Man's red face like fat-filled gooey custard.

As time went on, gossip among basic soldiers led many to suspect they'd possibly confront losing body parts in the gas chamber, maybe even eyes and nose. I became aware by now that gas chamber CS fear was—no question—worked directly by cadre. While training for nuke & chem was considered tactically necessary, in truth the entire platoon was getting strongly observed; response behaviors analyzed, processed, probed for clues.

Around noon the second day, a call came for platoon to enter the chamber. We'd have to make a march of about four miles (6.4km) through spark-green woods. Not a big deal for a bunch of mean guys in camo, weighed-down with chem stuff, weapons, all that.

About 3.2-miles through the trees our platoon was attacked by an advanced group in black-out chemical garb. Smokin' mini-bombs flew right into our lines, mostly yellow but some purply. We were fine on protection masks (aka gas masks) and maintained defensive positions that def got the group through. Must admit it was kinda fun. Not in the least terrifying or problematic. Great experience; much was learned.

When done, on we went to the gas chamber. Up up up a hill. We were quickly made to wait in lines, a squad at a time. First group was sent. Even with the protection masks you could see fear and confusion on faces of many. With eyes darting around. All that stuff.

First group disappeared into the chamber. Two minutes later you could hear guys literally screaming out of sight as they charged down the hill on the other side of the entrance.

So that's the gig, eh? Deadly CS, then tossed out a back door to scamper all screwed-up.

Had to be bad. Like, *really* bad. Right?

My group was commanded forward, and into the chamber we went. First thing I see is, the place is merely a large simple rectangular kinda concrete building. Empty as hell; seemed unstable. Standing were a trio of mean drills fully geared anti-chemical. Far out dressings, close to a matinee flick in a downtown theatre sci-fi thing from '52.

My squad line was probably nine guys total, all of us pretty aware we were trapped with zero options. We were stopped to parade rest. So we looked pretty serious.

From the drills: "You are not to move again unless told, understand?! We are not kidding!!"

I see. Sneakily lookin' around it was obvious the place was completely buried in hostile gas, clear but textured, almost like a heat wave or one of those phony natural oasis lines you see at the vanishing points of long desert highways.

Interesting. Until my arms caught fire.

Yeah, from out of nowhere both my hooks, unclothed, started to sizzle. Odd because you couldn't really see 'em at parade rest. But man I could *feel* it, like somebody poured that Vegas fry oil. And worse it got. If you ever got burned (who hasn't?) you know how it feels when skin nears final endurance, searing like shiny pink pig belly on a griddle.

And right now we were *closely* observed by the cadre. They watched all reactions. Analyzed. Clearly made calculations of emotion, tolerance. All that. Interesting.

But they said nothing. Nada. Just watched.

I realized for sure what I'd thought before: this entire thing was the US Army's internal method, totally about discovering actual character and nature of new soldiers. It was how the sergeants figured what each recruit halfway through basic was carrying in spine and mind.

Anyhow, here it came.

"Remove Protective Mask!!"

Masks came off. First thing felt was pure heat. Just the chamber being hot from outside weather, nothing more. In fact I kinda wondered if anything at all would change. Maybe talk and CS fables were bullshit, right?

Wrong. In about five seconds searing blaze hit my face and head and neck. Like plowed by a weird 18-wheeler. Wow!

I purposely did not move. For myself, keeping control was 100% critical. Do not move. Do not show pain. Do not say a Goddamned thing. And don't wheeze! Pretend like you just opened an icy cold theatre or something. And then a drill shouted:

"Do not move!! When outside, if any Goddamned idiot stops to help some useless wuss who falls down or goes crazy, I assure that your ass will do push-ups for days!! Hear me?!"

Of course we all yelled, "Yes, Sergeant!!"

As my face boiled I had to wonder how the hell long this would go on. Two guys next to me were already screaming. Bit over the top, I thought. One guy tried to run but was of course stopped by a really big sergeant with even bigger arms...who blocked the guy like a mountain.

I just stood there. Going on maybe 30 seconds at this point, and man it was painful. My eyes pulled a wild move: suddenly they felt literally pulled by my own body and muscles into a place at the back of my eye sockets. Almost funny, but I couldn't see clearly at all, and pain poured like Carolina Reaper sauce (aka HP22B) from jalapeño pitchers on fire.

"Open your eyes!! Prepare to exit!!"

Hah! Didn't notice I'd closed my eyes...like everyone else. Brain stuff. So I opened. Hooooooly moly. Like a hit by lightning. No sound.

But I kept the eyes open. And tears were zingin'.

"Do not touch your eyes!! Do not apply water!! Get down the hill!! Await the chemical to become less!! If you try and water your eyes you will poison your own optical nerves and your pain will be like a train hit your ass in the face!! Prepare!!"

The door opened from somebody outside and it occurred to me the damned place was darker than realized, considering all the new sun flying in.

"Do not run!! Stay in formation!! A-TEN-tion!!"

We came to attention. Tears running.

"*Left* Face!!"

We turned left face. Some quick, like myself, and a couple like they were a timeline behind somehow. Who knows.

The drill hesitated. Probably by design. Waiting seemed to go on and on and then...

"Walk and exit, now!! Do not run or you'll be put back inside, I guarantee!!"

So out we walked, click click click. Like counting a clock to get the hell going. And felt like casually walking Goddamned molten dragon breath from a nearby cave.

Once outside a couple guys ran. One fell almost immediately and, like the one guy in the woods, yelled for mommy. Seemed like Hogan's Heroes. But very real, and I knew that any of us stopping to "help" the guy would get asses kicked for sure.

It would also put you with negative behavior patterns the cadre were looking for.

Plop plop plop...I went slow down the big dirt hill, right toward the final spot where you could simply open your eyes and walk in circles to get chemicals off or reduced. Seems funny to remember now, but I walked slow like moving through a park. Zero emotion, zero expression, eyes as open as I could keep them because, damn did they burn! Potent pain through liquid. Wow.

Just kept walking. Just kept walking. And walking.

Got to the final spot, a nice level place at the bottom. I put arms up and out, kinda walked gentle in a circle. Looked like a kid playing airplane.

One guy was scratching at his face. He made it but had some pain issues, apparently. Big relief that the majority of my squad did well. And a couple were calm as me.

In a while, pain was gone. No water applied, no nothing. Just kinda went away.

We were called back to formation, word out that we'd march back through the woods and almost certainly get nailed in another attack. Hah!

My fave drill sarge Branch, super cool guy, actually knife-like harsh and critical of everything—but obviously a funny dude who did very well in genuine combat—he walked over to me and the two other guys who were also quiet and moved slow.

"Mazmanian! James! Dorton! Get over here!"

He walked us a little away from the others. We all stopped and he looked us over like a guy examining cars or something.

"You men were impressive. Best of platoon so far. Expected that from Dorton—mean bastard—but you other guys? Mazmanian, how the hell did you get so Goddamned tough? Never showed a damned thing. Remind me why the *fuck* you're in my Army!"

I of course told Branch I was recruited at the top level for specific Military Intelligence. And, got screwed. Was told I'd get put back on the Intelligence path sometime after training, or even before...but yes, for now I was 100% basic infantry. Hm.

“Well, Mazmanian, I'm gonna fix that shit. I ain't stupid. I knew why you were here and a Goddamn dumbass with a brain like yours is just what we need. In Russia!”

Tried not to laugh, but smiled. Cold War fun to come. Maybe.

We were all dismissed and away we went. Attacked in the woods, but was kinda fun. Again. Felt pretty dialed about the chemical stuff. Absolutely got good at equipment and uniform, putting a mask on in seconds like a speed-up movie.

Time went on and things indeed changed. Too many stories to tell, virtually none that are known by others. Was quite an experience. Kinda from boy to man in days.

And the irony of being just south of Atlanta when Sting, Stewart Copeland, Andy Summers (known as The Police) played the gigantic downtown Omni Coliseum Theatre (now gone) in November, at a show that wound up on a video called “The Police: Synchronicity Concert”. If you know more about my wild past, it might seem fascinating as it does to me.

Yeah, couldn't leave base when Police played. Had I known Sir Gordon and Miles Copeland (Stewart's brother), plus Andy Summers and Lol Crème, four chaps I'd deal with in person later on— were just up the street makin' big big history...?

Wow.

Time for a Stella.

End.